Violin

"You can't phrase with your neck."

Why energy is for export only.

by Ian Snyder

During my early years as a violin student, I felt as though there was a great deal of conflicting information about physical energy and movement while playing. My teachers seemed generally to discourage it, some diplomatically, while one told my mother she must be giving me too many vitamins. Titans of the past like Menuhin and Oistrakh played with mesmerizing expression while appearing like statues. But on the other hand, I would see string quartets and the violin sections of the Berlin Philharmonic sharing an embodiment of the pulse and musical direction. Some voices seemed to moderate the range of possibilities. In the Nadja Solerno Sonnenberg documentary, *Speaking in Strings*, Dorothy DeLay explains that she tries to reduce extraneous motion in her students but that in the case of Nadja, her level of physical engagement felt authentic. As I matured, I began to feel as though we weren't always observing the same thing. There is the charlatanism of the Lindsey Stirlings (if you haven't seen TwoSet's parody, "Lindsey Stirling in Public," I highly recommend it). And there is the functional physical communication of ensemble playing. But for students and professionals who have sincerely-felt musical excitement, and who are aware of the need to generate enough energy to create musical apexes and project over orchestras, there comes the question of how to honor those goals without becoming tense or exhausting ourselves.

I had two experiences in particular which made me ponder what might be going on and what the reconciliation might be. First, a violist friend of mine shared a story from a lesson with Carol Rodland. She told him, in good humor, "You know, you can't phrase with your neck!" As the musical energy picked up, he had begun to hold on to increasing tension in his neck, which was visible to Ms. Rodland, but wasn't generating any musical difference. A couple years later, I saw a colleague's student performing a showpiece and noticed that his tone was actually biggest when he meant to play piano, and when the music called for forte, he would visibly squeeze every involved muscle group and pull his posture in toward his sternum, and the resulting dynamic was actually softer. I began to be more mindful of when I detected semblances of these habits in my own playing, and realized that sincere musical feeling can easily get housed internally in our body rather than being directed into the string. This concept of being focused on directing energy into the string itself allows us to embrace the energy and emotion that we feel while channeling it into a musical result that we and listeners can perceive.

The nature of music is such that we respond with greater physical energy when the musical energy is also on the rise. Therefore, I am on the lookout particularly in cases of forte dynamics, crescendi, sforzandi, and staccato notes. We see a similar phenomenon in difficult passages, but I'll discuss that separately.

I see four main areas in our bodies where this kind of overdrive occurs, although I imagine it can vary so widely from person to person that it might help to keep an open radar rather than confining oneself to a shopping list. In my experience the usual suspects are our right shoulder, right thumb, neck, and left fingers.

In the first place, it is extremely helpful to validate the student's musical feeling. We expect the same in general psychology, and music is no different. A repressed feeling is always going to end up in some godforsaken, unwanted place, ready and waiting to shoot us in the foot at a later date. Ask the student to be clear about exactly the kind of tone, phrasing, or emotion they are trying to generate. Talk about what factors (arm weight, speed, bow placement, sounding point, vibrato) can accomplish that goal. Then have them play a given passage while noticing the physical area in question (perhaps a long stretch of fortissimo while monitoring for a relaxed right shoulder). When this comes up with my students, I make it clear that they will need to set time aside specifically to work on this, and that they should scan their music for a handful of places daily to practice in this way.

Often simply setting aside time to practice awareness fixes the problem. But depending on the zone in question, there may be specific strategies that are needed. In the case of neck tension, the student can play the passage with the head released from the chinrest where it can't bear down upon the violin in excitement. A friend in Minnesota Orchestra says he was taught to practice musically intense sections while grinning, because positioning the facial muscles that way releases tension in the neck. When dealing with the right arm, it may prompt us to have a tangent on arm weight in general: I might have the student release their arm weight into my hands or have them place the bow on the string and silently pull the string left and right. I also sometimes have to bundle discussion of right shoulder and thumb because both the bearing down of the right shoulder and the pinching between the thumb and index finger are two popular cheat methods for expediently adding "tone," and by asking for one to be released, the student might revert to the other. Tight left fingers are a case where surrender is needed, but I find it constructive to ask a student to focus the energy in the right arm and keep the left fingers light. Sometimes I tell younger students that the right arm is forte but the left hand is piano, and joke that it might feel like patting their head while rubbing their tummy.

One of the most encouraging things about this process is that as the student starts to send more of the energy into the violin itself, there is a positive feedback loop: the student hears the newly loud, vivid, or energetic sounds, and receives a sense of satisfaction or completion: "Hey, I'm hearing that intensity I feel internally. I guess I don't have to push more." I sense that some of the most tense students are locked in a vicious cycle where, daunted by their inability to get the sound they need, they continue to trap more and more physical energy into any squeezable or press-able muscle group.

Finally, a red herring. Naturally, we all

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see students who are physically tense when repertoire is difficult. I don't think what we are seeing is heartfelt musical energy but, rather, instinctual motions related to "holding on" or controlling movements. The solution is a separate discussion, because we are looking to mollify anxiety-driven tension rather than properly channel exuberance. But one parallel I see is that simply telling a student to inhibit physical motions might make things even worse. Perhaps the student can add movement in a particular way (I sometimes feel as though half of bow arm problems are cured by asking the student to use more bow!). I often ask the student to "let X happen" or to make a muscle "soft" or "quiet." In any case, inhibition has no place on the violin!

I imagine that we will always have a spectrum of players who incorporate various amounts of motion with equally excellent results. I recently saw Benjamin Beilman perform a recital at Schubert Club and took the audience on an odyssey of color and emotion while staying physically centered throughout. And when Geoff Nuttall of the St. Lawrence Quartet passed away last year, I came across (and encourage you to search for) a YouTube video of the Haydn Op. 20 No. 3 Quartet in which he does all but run laps around the other quartet members. But he does so while keeping an efficient bow arm that generates a great array of color. Many of his gestures involve opening his body fluidly upward and outward, or releasing excess through his feet. It is a lot, but it seems that the energy is never trapped in his body en route to the violin. We can all find a position in this range of possibilities where we can feel comfortable and free and still make certain that our feelings end up transmitting to the listener.

Ian Snyder teaches privately in Southwest Minneapolis and has served on the faculty of the University of Minnesota Bravo! Institute for Keyboard and Strings. He has performed with the Minnesota Orchestra and Minnesota Opera, as well as a variety of freelance projects, including a recording for Prince. As a teacher, he is particularly interested in developing natural physical motions in playing, enhancing students' awareness of tone, and in integrating musical style from the earliest levels.

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